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Parens Patriae: The Private Roots of Public Policy toward Children

Broken Promises: How Americans Fail Their Children by W. Norton Grubb; Marvin Lazerson

Review by: David F. Labaree

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## *Parens Patriae:* The Private Roots of Public Policy toward Children

W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson. *Broken Promises: How Americans Fail Their Children*. New York: Basic Books, 1982. Pp. x, 358.

American social science has the well-deserved reputation of being specialized to the point of obscurity and dispassionate to the point of apathy. With academic careers grounded in an advanced division of scholarly labor, academic researchers are compelled as a simple matter of survival to prove themselves within the narrow confines of their chosen area of expertise. All too often, the result is a body of work that risks little by demonstrating hypotheses that no one else can knowledgeably challenge. This conservative definition of the scope of the academic enterprise leads to an extraordinary reticence on issues of public policy and political debate. Retiring behind the twin shields of narrow expertise and the scientific method, researchers shy away from political involvements as unprofessional and unscientific. Those who venture beyond the protective barrier are accused of straying from social science into polemic.

Unfortunately, there is more than a grain of truth in the accusation. The sheer complexity of contemporary society makes it so that generalists often become little more than glib popularizers whose pronouncements have more breadth than depth. In circumstances such as these, it is a matter of great moment to stumble across a book by American social scientists that provides the extraordinary combination of serious scholarship, political engagement, and sweeping vision. W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson have produced a book, *Broken Promises*, that exhibits just this combination of characteristics. As broad in scope as it is timely, the book focuses on the issue of (in the words of the subtitle) "how Americans fail their children."

Throughout the history of the republic, social reformers have identified children as the cause of special concern. Seen both as the helpless victims of the nation's past and as the only hope for its future, children have been made the object of countless reform-minded programs, policies, and institutions. Consider the variety of these child-saving efforts: public schools, orphanages, reformatories, psychological testing, vocational guidance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), day-care centers, and parenting classes—to name just a few.

In these efforts we have provided public support for children where we are unwilling to reform conditions for adults, and children's institutions have been made responsible for creating a just and equitable society from one riddled with inequities. Yet our implicit promises to children have been only partially fulfilled. . . . The same problems besetting children and families keep reemerging because the reforms to treat them have always been contradictory and incomplete. The recurring cycles of crisis and reform are evidence of our broken promises (pp. 5-6).

Grubb and Lazerson seek to explain the reasons for this unbroken pattern of broken promises. They begin by identifying two major misconceptions that

underlie this cycle of reform and failure: the belief that a society can reform itself by molding its children, and the belief that the family is the basic unit of society.

It has been a long-standing assumption in this country that the worst inequities of American life (which have proven so resistant to our own efforts at reform) can be transformed by our children if only we prepare them for this mission by means of careful nurture and socialization. This idea implies that children have special needs that require special social programs. Yet the authors vigorously argue the opposite point, that in fact children suffer from the same inequalities of class, race, and sex that afflict their parents and thus that the lot of the young will not improve until these structural inequalities are mitigated. The American dream of equal opportunity for personal betterment has been preserved, but only by deferring it to the next generation. The result, say the authors, is that this country's long history of child-centered reforms has been grounded in a stark pessimism about the chances of transforming the present and a misplaced optimism about the future—both of which helped doom these reform efforts to failure.

Another potent misconception has been the belief that the family is the building block out of which a society is constructed. This idea is such a commonplace that the temptation is to treat it as a harmless platitude and look elsewhere for one's analytical grist, but Grubb and Lazerson refuse to do so on the grounds that it constitutes a dangerous lie. It is a lie because the family probably never was and certainly is not now an autonomous institution. Particularly under advanced capitalism, the family has become thoroughly integrated with the rest of society—although perhaps subordinated is a more appropriate term. The family is wholly dependent on the occupational structure, has been invaded by commerce, and is losing its functions to those very institutions (such as schools and professions) that were erected to save it. The danger in this lie is that it encourages reformers to focus their efforts on the family in the same way that they focus on children, under the mistaken impression that they are dealing with the crux of the problem. Its long-term effect is to divert energy from the solution of real problems and to doom existing reform efforts to failure.

These misconceptions about children and the family receive continuing support from the ideology that has grown up in this country alongside the social structure of capitalism. The core of this book and the essence of its contribution to the literature is the authors' painstakingly detailed, yet impassioned, account of the ways in which this ideology has permeated and ultimately undermined America's efforts to resolve its social problems. The salient element in American capitalist ideology is possessive individualism, a belief that leads to the cold dichotomies that infect our social policies: private vs. public, us vs. them, mine vs. yours.

If you take the belief that children are the hope of the future, combine it with the belief that the family is the basic unit of society, add a sense of crisis and a strong commitment to the private sector, you have the recipe for the doctrine that has governed American policy toward children and families for two centuries—*parens patriae*. The core of this doctrine asserts that the family is an autonomous and self-sustaining institution and that child-raising is the respon-

sibility of parents alone. Under these conditions, the state can only intervene in place of the parent when the family has failed in its private responsibilities either through pathology or negligence.

The central irony of *Broken Promises* is that in spite of the nation's dedication to the sanctity of the family and the primacy of the private sector, the doctrine of *parens patriae* has led to a long series of public interventions into family affairs, thereby undercutting the very assumptions on which these actions were based.

The historical record thus reveals an extraordinary phenomenon. Every period of major social change has seen an expansion of public responsibility for the plight of families and children, blurring the distinction between public and private. Yet Americans have continued to insist that families are private, and that public policies should "shore up" the private family as the "basic unit of society" (p. 29).

From the friendly visitor to the psychiatric social worker, from the school marm to the school counselor, from the poorhouse to AFDC—this privatistic doctrine has spurred a remarkable surge of public programs, policies, and professionals that increasingly belied whatever claims to autonomy in child care the family once had.

Yet this is not simply another tale of unintended consequences, of reformers who are duped by their own ideology into overlooking the effects of their actions. *Parens patriae* may have had the ironic effect of expanding state involvement in the name of preserving private responsibility, yet the programs that resulted bore the clear marks of their origins. First, since public intervention is only justified when the family proves inadequate to the task, such programs carry with them a strong implication that the particular families in question are to blame. After all, families should be able to raise healthy, well-adjusted, academically able, motivated, cooperative, law-abiding, and work-oriented children on their own; if their children develop a problem in acquiring any of these traits, then the fault is clearly with the parents. Thus, the delinquency of lower-class youths is the result of an unstable family and their poor school performance is due to parental indifference. Of course, as Grubb and Lazerson put it, "Given the many institutions that influence children it is more accurate to describe parents not as determiners but as *managers* of their children's lives" (p. 63). In other words, how can we blame parents for what they cannot control? American ideology puts an unreasonable burden on the family and then has the agents of the state grudgingly step in when the family fails to deal with this burden, all the time grumbling about parental irresponsibility.

There is a second and closely related sign of the ideological origins of American policy toward children and families—its strictly remedial character. There are remarkably few programs to prevent social problems or to promote a healthy society, for children or adults. Since the state is seen only as the parent of last resort, it therefore has no business preempting parental duties at which the parents have not yet failed. For example, as the authors note, many of the problems encountered by and caused by lower-class youths could be prevented by programs that offer meaningful, long-term work with reasonable pay and career possibil-

ities. Such a policy is not implemented because it is enormously expensive and because it would involve an extraordinary degree of public intervention into the private economy. Instead we have created a variety of middle-class jobs in a failed attempt to remedy the youth problems that result from underemployment: gang control workers, vocational guidance counselors, remedial reading teachers, social workers, and so on.

A third sign of the ideological corruption of our social policies is in what the authors call the absence of "public love" for our children as revealed through these policies. Americans make a sharp distinction between what is right for one's own children and what is right for other people's children. Love for our own children leads us to show them extraordinary care, concern, generosity, tolerance, and affection. Yet our programs for other people's children reveal stinginess, rigidity, intolerance, and raw instrumentalism. Possessive individualism at the family level produces an unlovely tendency toward private munificence and public penury. In the absence of a tradition which holds that our children are a public responsibility and are worthy of public love, we turn our backs to other people's children in order to focus on our own. Consider one example of how the lack of public love affects the character of public schooling. The public education of other people's children cannot be justified simply as acculturation, empowerment, and enlightenment—although these may well be our goals for our own children. Instead we demand some sort of demonstrable return on our investment in education. So we construe schooling as an investment in human capital that will lead to economic growth, and we require quantitative evidence that our educational programs bring identifiable gains in achievement to reassure ourselves that this investment is paying off.

A fourth sign of the intrusion of capitalist ideology into our policies toward children and families can be found in the chronic manipulation of public programs for private ends. Again public schooling provides a good example. Privatism leads parents to view their children's school as something other than a truly public institution, one which provides a truly collective experience in response to broad public needs. Instead they tend to view it as a place where their children can get a competitive edge over their classmates by accumulating more knowledge, more honors, more skills, more and better credentials—all in order to solidify or enhance class position. The historical trend has reinforced this private use of public schooling. The common schools were founded in order to provide moral education, to train citizens in a common republican culture; yet over the last one hundred years the movement has been away from this broad and public vision of schooling and toward a vision which is increasingly vocational. This vocationalism both subordinates the public school to the private economy and encourages families to look on school as a means of individual status attainment.

*Broken Promises* is a book with many strengths. One is its historical perspective, which permits the reader to look at American policy toward children and families as a process of problem-solving that has both evolutionary and cyclical characteristics. The pattern has been for a steady increase in public intervention and a continuing denial of public responsibility. The result has been a steady stream of new programs based on the old familiar *parens patriae* ra-

tionale, virtually guaranteeing that the promised solutions to pressing social problems would repeatedly fail. Another of the book's strengths is its detailed analysis of a vast array of child-centered policies over the course of American history. In this review I have only been able to hint at the extent to which the authors have carried out thoughtful and nuanced examinations of particular policies and programs. I have focused attention on the book's larger argument, but in so doing I may have left the impression that this is an ideological tract. Far from it. The bulk of the book is devoted to historically informed and carefully documented studies of the policies related to schools, youths, child welfare, and child care, as well as an examination of the professional interest groups that speak for children.

What ties together these policy studies into a coherent and disturbing book is the authors' theoretical focus and their moral urgency. The theoretical viewpoint in this book is clearly spelled out and it is woven through the entirety of the text. The problems facing children and families, the public perception of these problems, the nature of the solutions posed by reformers, and the failure of these reforms—all are traced by the authors back to the structure and ideology of American capitalism. In doing this they achieve a nice balance between theoretical clarity and historical complexity. But in cutting their way through the jungle of historical evidence, they never lose sight of the political importance of their task. This book is a rare cross between an academic and a political document. While taking care to explain social process, Grubb and Lazerson keep alive a sense of anger about the way things are and a sense of urgency about the need for change.

Their political purpose is enhanced by a tone of cautious optimism that pervades the book. This is not another voice in the wilderness, ineffectually raging against the ways of the world. The authors take pains to point to the positive elements in American ideological history that can provide the basis for truly progressive reform.

We can trace back to the colonial period a number of values, embodied in American institutions and consistently supported in public debate—individual freedom, democracy, the work ethic, family love, community, the value of education, the importance of children—which can form the basis for progressive principles. The problem is that every one of these values has been corrupted by capitalism, so that what remain in practice are distorted and hollow vestiges of revered ideals. The distortions have too often left these ideals the property of conservatives (p. 286).

A major purpose of the book, therefore, is to recapture these values from the grip of the conservatives and to forge a new set of social policies based on them. The result will be a radical reform of American society:

The principles we have offered embody at least two attributes: they require relatively egalitarian conditions, in contrast to older conceptions adapted to the class divisions of capitalism; they also require some modification of the intense individualism of nineteenth-century liberalism, particularly by establishing a sense of collective responsibility and an allegiance to community as well as to one's self. Progressive principles therefore require the transformation of capitalism, since capitalism in all of its many forms generates class divisions and inequality and con-

stantly promotes individualism in place of collective responsibility (pp. 296-97).

If the welfare system contains within it all that is bad about American social programs for children and families, the public schools (in spite of all the ways they have been shaped by capitalist ideology) contain the elements of a more progressive kind of policy. *Parens patriae* is weaker here or at least is a more recent addition that could be removed without disturbing the institution's roots. Unlike AFDC and other related welfare programs, schools are primarily directed toward promotive and preventive, rather than remedial, ends; they draw from the whole population and thus have the potential for creating a collective experience; they can aim at developing capabilities rather than levying blame; and they could become a locus for the development of public love for children. The public schools therefore could provide a medium for keeping some of those promises that the policies of *parens patriae* have so consistently broken over the years, and could provide the model for defeating this doctrine in the society as a whole.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

DAVID F. LABAREE